

## **Primary Source Analysis: Declaration of the Irish Republic, 1916**

### **Introduction:**

Among the most important documents in Irish history is the declaration of the Republic, a piece of paper read out by Patrick Pearse on the steps of the General Post Office, that lit the spark of militant Irish nationalism and led to the creation of the first independent Irish state. It is hard to understate the importance of this document not just on Irish history, but on the history of the entire British Isles. The impacts of the declaration include the Irish Civil War, the decades long struggle, the Troubles, and the modern borders of not just one but two sovereign states. All of this from a document not five-hundred words long - a legacy unlike most other pieces of political work in the Twentieth Century.

### **Background:**

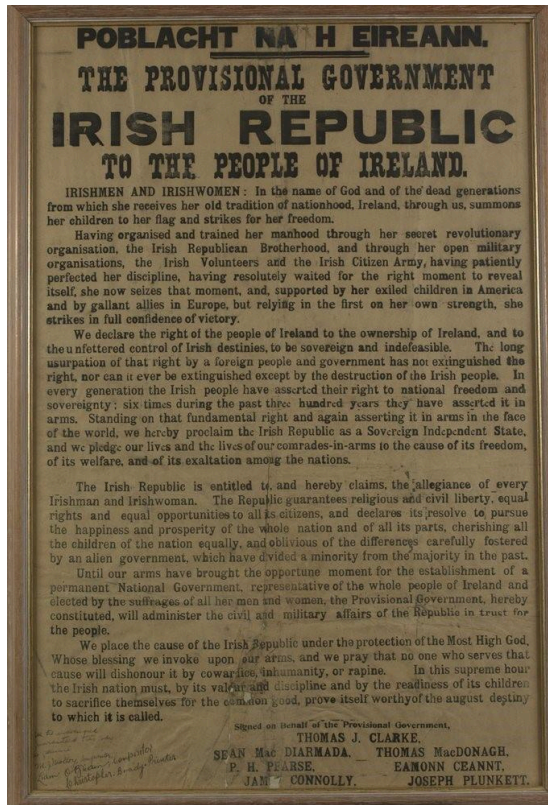
To fully understand the situation in Ireland and the wider United Kingdom at the time of the proclamation, a brief examination of the Great War and its impacts, as well as centuries of Westminster rule on Ireland must be considered. Independence movements within Ireland had been a centuries long political cause, championed by some of the greatest political titans in Irish history - Daniel O'Connor, the Young Irelanders, and others. It was only in the wake of the proclamation of the Irish Republic that real, solid political change happened. As John Roberts states in his book *Europe 1880-1945*, "This was the turning-point of British political history in the twentieth century" (Roberts, 1967, Pg. 388). The proclamation could hardly have come at a worse time for the British government, as failures in the Great War and issues within the governing powers at home were compounded by the outbreak of resistance in Ireland, a sign that all was not as well as the British people had been led to believe.

The mass slaughter at the Somme, as well as friction between the ruling Liberal and Conservative parties, created the perfect storm for the mishandling of the Irish rebellion. When the rising occurred in Easter 1916, the British response after it had been crushed was to kill, to execute, seven of the members of the Provisional Government. This was a direct result of the British decision to leave Dublin under military administration, in such a way that a peaceful resolution was nigh-on impossible. The execution of the leaders of the Provisional Government set in stone the path that Irish nationalism would take - one of violence and direct opposition to British rule in any capacity. A. J. P. Taylor, the author of *English History 1914-1945* states that "Force seemed the only remedy in Ireland, and the extremists, who had been discredited by the Easter rebellion, soon began to triumph at by-elections" (Taylor, 1966, Pg. 57).

While the long term impacts of Irish nationalism and suppression led to the outbreak of violence around Easter in 1916, the short term causes of the conflict are rooted in the Great War, which was at the time tearing Europe apart. German aid towards Irish Republican movements provided an impetus for further inflammation. While these statements of support may have seemed on the surface to have been in keeping with other German actions across Europe at the time, in Ireland the promises were not genuine (Taylor, 1966, Pg. 56). It is because of these reasons that the uprising failed, along with the mishandling of Republican forces in Ireland itself. The clearest example of this is in the case of John MacNeill, the Volunteer chief of staff (Volunteer in this case meaning armed Irish Republicans), who "first resigned and then cancelled the plans for mobilisation" (Taylor, 1966, Pg. 56).

### The Document:

The proclamation of the Irish Republic itself was a mess, and the rising was a total failure in practical terms. However it is the core goal of this piece of research to examine the Proclamation itself, its language and its impact, which is arguably the most important aspect of the whole Easter Rising.



The language within the document can best be described as emotional, and at times poetic. For example, it uses terms such as “the dead generations”, a reference to the massive casualties of the Irish Famine, and “her exiled children in America”, alluding to the mass of emigrants that fled Ireland both during and after the catastrophe that was the Famine. Given the emotional language used, and the personification of Ireland as a figure, this proclamation reads more like a national anthem in places than as a political statement. This is due, mostly, to the work of one of the main signatories and participants of the Rising; Patrick Pearce.

He was the man who read out the proclamation on the steps of the General Post Office, and like the rest of his fellow signatories, he was executed in Kilmainham Gaol in Dublin. His impact on the document can be seen however in the flowing, personified words of its core text.

For example, “We place the cause of the Irish Republic under the protection of most High God” and “we pledge our lives and the lives of our comrades-in-arms to the cause of its... exaltation among the nations”.

Patrick Pearce is not the only signatory however - there are seven of them in total, and they all faced summary execution by the British military authorities in Dublin after the failure of the rising (Taylor, 1966, Pg. 56). This brutal act of tyranny did not, unsurprisingly, soothe things over in Ireland in the wake of a populist uprising. The damage done was immense, and the brutal execution of the seven leaders of the rising only exacerbated problems for the British in Ireland. Within a few years, Ireland would be free of British rule. One of the cruellest forms of punishment meted out after the rising was the execution of James Connolly, the leader of the Irish Citizen Army, a left-wing militia that participated in the Rising (BBC, 2014a).

Connolly was, according to his BBC biography, “the most effective and inspirational leader of the uprising” (BBC, 2014b), which is unsurprising given his role in labour organisation before the Great War, in which he participated in the largest strike in Irish history, the Dublin Lockout.

Alongside Connolly and Pearce, the other signatories were Thomas Clarke, Sean Mac Diarmada, Thomas MacDonagh and Joseph Plunkett, all prominent Irish Republicans and revolutionaries in their parts. The one factor that united them was their association with the

Irish Republican Brotherhood, a “small, secret, revolutionary body... committed to the use of force to establish an independent Irish Republic” (BBC, 2014c). The IRB was integral to the Easter Rising, as all its main proponents and supporters were members of, or affiliated with, the IRB. The radical nature of the organisation is hard to discern from the proclamation however - it is liberal and very tolerant of normally polarised faiths. It calls for “religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens”, which, in a country marred with internal religious divides, and marked by violent outbursts of anti-Catholic and anti-Protestant violence, as well as a history of Catholic suppression, really stands out.

It is interesting that unlike other revolutions and revolutionary movements that took place in the first half of the Twentieth Century, an emphasis was placed onto religious equality. In the Russian Revolution and later Civil War, religion was a subject of persecution and could lead to summary execution, in its most extreme cases. In Germany, after the rise of Hitler to power, religion became a weapon for the state to use against its population, with priests and believers alike forced into camps (Roberts, 1967, Pg. 449). Both of these revolutions of course take place after the outbreak of violence in Ireland, and were not in any way significantly influenced by it. However, it is interesting to analyse the use of religion to pacify and unite, or attempt to, in Ireland in the case of a revolution. The internal divisions that religion had wrought on Irish politics, population and land were not an appealing thing to continue in the minds of the Easter Revolutionaries.

The question of land in Ireland was a contentious and important subject for the main powerbase in the country - the tenant farmers who worked the land at a subsistence level. Making up the majority of the electorate and overwhelmingly Catholic, the small-scale landowners and farmers were an important group to court for any group wanting to make its way into the avenues of power in Ireland. Subdivisions had led to an environment in which landlords would lease out their land to smaller tenants, who would then lend out subsequently smaller plots of land to tenants and farmers. Dating back to the first plantations, this system was dominated mostly by wealthy English or Irish Protestants, who were often absent for prolonged periods of time, which meant that farmers were often paying their rent to absentee landlords, who would provide little in return and could evict them at any time. Like throughout rural states all over the world, land reform was one of the most pressing issues in the minds of the rural population. This is clearly evidenced by the swift passing of a land reform bill in 1923 (BBC, 2023), only a few months after the first step of independence.

Figures like Connolly as left wing or socialist pillars supported land reform and the redistribution of land, not in a communist sense but in a nationalist approach to reduce the power of English landowners' control. Removing the “Big House” as it was known (BBC, 2023), of powerful aristocratic control of wide swathes of land so that local farmers could own and work their own land, without fear of eviction by a landlord. The land reform act passed in 1923 “confiscated estates from many landlords, or subjected them to compulsory buy orders” (BBC, 2023). This redistribution of wealth and land in Ireland, and the ideas that empowered it, can be clearly seen in the Proclamation itself. It talks about the “right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland” and uses terms like “sovereign and indefeasible” to reinforce the independence and right of Irish people to own Irish land.

Land reform and distribution had been central to Irish politics for centuries by the time of the Easter Rising. The impact that it had on Ireland for its entire modern history is hard to measure, as its impacts on emigration after the Great Famine, and the changes that it created within the Irish diaspora within Ireland itself led directly to the socio-political climate that emerged in the twentieth century.

#### Conclusion:

The background that this piece of research has offered on the Proclamation of the Irish Republic has aimed to shed light on some of the peoples and groups involved in the movement, as well as the impact that this had on the creation, composition and impact of the Proclamation. Narrowing down the most important factors at the time of the proclamation, and the events, ideas and philosophies that impacted its creation and composition is no easy task - there are, after all, seven signatories, representing at least three separate groups, all acting independently of one another in the periods both before and after the Easter Rising. Of most interest to this document though is the issue of land. As through most modern Irish history, land, its reform, and its owners was the defining characteristic in Irish politics.

The men who wrote and signed this document clearly understood the impact that land ownership would have on the electorate, and also the impact that interfaith relations would display. Reconciliatory language used in the proclamation, such as the “[guarantee] of religious and civil liberty”, shows a clear desire for a way to develop a peaceful environment for religious coexistence within a future Irish state. The divisions around faith had marked politics in Ireland for decades, and due to the failure of the Rising, would continue to haunt the island into the future. Clashes between Catholic and Protestant were nothing new at the time of the Rising, and are sadly still the norm in Ireland today. In fact, according to a BBC survey, of the MLA members sitting in 2015, 60 professed to be religious, while only 15 disagreed (West, 2015).

Even today, the legacy of the Proclamation lives on. Its importance in Irish politics and its status as a symbol of Irish nationalism and republicanism, as well as the men and groups who were instrumental in its creation, is notable. For example, the Proclamation is read out every year by a member of the Irish army on the anniversary of the Rising (BBC, 2019), and there are monuments to both the Rising and the Proclamation scattered across Ireland, and throughout the rest of the world. It is arguable then that the most successful aspect of the Easter Rising was not any serious political change, but the creation of a symbol and message behind which Irish nationalism and republicanism could unite and work towards. The use of virtuous messaging, such as providing equal opportunities for Irish people regardless of faith or landed status, is something that has stuck with Ireland deep into the twenty first century, as Ireland is now one of the most progressive states in Europe, leaps and bounds ahead of other European nations.

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